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ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates on the ways self-reflective practices that have sprung from within the postmodern discourse may conduce to meaningful learning, all without forgetting that the truth is idiosyncratic and that the highest human goals are barely teachable. Hence, rather than prescribing methodological "recipes," the paper looks at the coordinates which agitating patterns and boundaries of learning may help to recognize the social processes that define, select, and organize knowledge. In the first section, the paper reviews some definitions of postmodernism and formulates an alternative one that underwrites a holistic perspective of meaning. In the second section, the paper addresses the principles of emancipatory learning, reviews some self-reflective techniques, and ponders the capabilities of the "modern" media to conduce to reflective quests of meaning. (Contains 1 figure and 42 references.) (CR)

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Paper: "Meaningful Learning: A perspective"

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Works on the relationship between the postmodern and education have gained significant momentum (Murphy 1988, Doll 1989, Peters 1989, Kiziltan et alt 1990). Within a postmodern perspective, the curriculum becomes a means towards awakening consciousness, reaching the personal within the social, and building, rather that receiving, meaning (Doll, 1990).

In spite of its generous integrated goals, postmodern education may lead to new dogmatism easily generalizable because of the power of "modern" mass networking. The attempts at generalizing politics of meaning through education may well spoil the ideals of meaningfulness "at a time where education is so deeply rooted in economics and trade values" (Tochon, 1995: 1).

This article elaborates on the ways self-reflective practices that have sprung from within the postmodern discourse may conduce to meaningful learning, all without forgetting that the truth is idiosyncratic and that the highest human goals are barely teachable.

Hence, rather than prescribing methodological "recipes," the paper looks at the coordinates which agitating patterns and boundaries of learning may help to recognize the social processes that define, select and organize knowledge.

In its first section, the paper reviews some definitions of postmodernism and formulates an alternative one that underwrites a holistic perspective of meaning. In its second section, the paper addresses the principles of emancipatory learning, reviews some self-reflective techniques, and ponders the capabilities of the "modern" media [1] to conduce to reflective quests of meaning.

I. POSTMODERNISM: A DEFINITION

Diachronic definitions of postmodernism see in the prefix "post" a breaking function implying a radical overcoming of the modern. Jameson (1983), for instance, considers postmodernism as a "periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order." (p. 113).

Synchronic definitions, on the other hand, emphasize the continuity implied by the concept postmodern. Jencks, for example, sees postmodernism as a "...critical and selective continuation of modernism and its transcendence" (1989: 10).

Taking Jencks' view an step further, the postmodern may be viewed as a signifier of the contemporary cultural and material conditions, yet without implying a radical overcoming of the modern. And, thus a definition of postmodernism may be put forward which is based, as illustrated in Figure 1, on the transcendence of such modern tenets as rationality, construction of metanarratives and social and historical determinations.

Insert Figure 1 here

Beyond Rationality

The move beyond rationality appears as the first of the shifts upon which our definition of "postmodern" can be built. As observed elsewhere (Murphy 1988), modernism leads to the rationalization of the world in three ways. First, facts are thought to be objective and accessible to any observer. Second, if truth is to be discovered, subjectivity must be removed from the knowledge acquisition process. And third, error is equated with the failure to perceive reality.

Challenging the principle of a universal rationality, postmodernism claims the "breaking apart of reason and the development of microrationalities confined in terms of the

multiplicity of language games" (Peters 1989: 103). This claim implies that subjective reconstruction of the external reality is possible provided that people understand how to work without rules in order to formulate the rules of what have been done (Lyotard 1988).

This shift from a Cartesian/Newtonian way of looking at reality further means the possibility of an affective response to a cosmological reality which, as Oliver and Gershman (1989: 29) observe, "have tended to be underappreciated."

Beyond Construction of Metanarratives and Categorizations

The second postmodern move is concerned with the death of all metanarratives and categorizations. Indeed, unifying myths of modern society and culture such as progress and performativity are loosing credibility. Such a loss is, according to Lyotard, particularly true for science because " it [science] is incapable of legitimating the other language games" (1988: 40).

If one agrees with Lyotard that there is no universal metalanguage, then speculative or humanistic philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimization duties, and two important aspects of post-modern vision emerge: "doubtfulness" and "openness." Aspects whose importance, particularly that of the latter, has been emphasized by Jencks when saying that "openness" is "perhaps the biggest shift in the Post-Modern world" (1989: 55).

Beyond Social/Historical Determination

Postmodern openness leads to the third of the shifts from modern social and historical determination to postmodern activation of differences and new potentialities. Indeed, the mode of consciousness that has become normal during the last two centuries is deeply rooted in the present. Or, as Habermas (1981) puts it,

> Aesthetic modernity is characterized by attitudes which find a common focus in a changed consciousness of time...The new value placed on the transitory, the elusive, the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses the longing for an undefiled, an immaculate and stable present (pp. 4-5).

Opposing this deterministic vision, postmodernists contend that there is room for the "not-here" and "not-now" because to live is to be immersed in a web of interactions embracing past, present and future. As a result, postmodernists argue in favor of the adoption of complex theoretical structures and the activation of new potentials. In favor of sophisticated foundations, Doll (1989) observes how Prigogine's (1980) theories can shed light on the structures of living systems "which are in a formative, and indeed chaotic, state of far-from equilibrium becoming" (p. 245). Equally, Jencks (1989) emphasizes the notion of complexity when he says that "postmodernism will support a relative absolutism, of fragmental holism, which insists on the developing and jumping nature of scientific growth" (p. 59).

As far as the activation of new possibilities is concerned, revisionary postmodernists, drawing on Whitehead's (1929) and Hartshorne's (1937) works, make the case for a sensuous participation in the universe. Toulmin (1982), for instance, advocates for a return to a cosmos, to "a single integrated system united by universal principles" (p. 224). Similarly, Griffin claims for a postmodern science "...not restricted to the domain of things assumed to be wholly physical..." (1988: 26). In the same way, Cobb (1988) conceives of a new spirituality, "...the ecological vision of the world with its obvious religious meaning without reference to divinity" (p. 112). And Bohm (1988) envisions a new world order in which "the whole universe is actively enfolded to some degree in each of the parts" (p. 66).

If it is right that the central issue in defining postmodernism is one of transcending rather than dismissing modern assumptions, then, on the basis of the foregoing shifts, one shall equate postmodernism with "the recovery of genuine meaning upon which a renewed culture may be found. A recovery which implies the recognition of concepts such as development of microrationalities, doubtfulness, openness, indeterminacy of being, and sensuous participation in the universe."

II. PATHS TO MEANINGFUL LEARNING

So far, a "transcendent" definition of postmodernism has been given through the modernity/postmodernity shifts discussed above. Now, it is time to speculate about how postmodernism, as defined here, may provide the basis for an epistemological change in education. For so doing, the foundational basis of emancipatory learning will be first outlined. Next, some well-established self-reflective techniques, which may prove useful in generating critical awareness, will be reviewed. Finally, attention will be turned to the potential role of the media as emancipatory learning tools.

Emancipatory Learning

To reconceptualize current discourses of meaning so that they fit into the postmodern frame sketched here is not an easy task; especially because such discourses are clearly defocused by empirical/analytical modes of thinking which have become so "normal" in our "developed" societies. However, if it is true, as Boulding (1978) claims, that in any cultural epoch selectively empowered images can explode later into the realized future, it is also true that the highlighting of images related to the inner world of values may permit the emergence of a new understanding of meaning. Such a highlighting would require a reflective/hermeneutic exploration of the underlying interests of sociocultural processes. The works of Jürgen Habermas, Jack Mezirow and Paulo Freire may help with that exploration.

In his theory of "knowledge and human interests," Habermas (1971) links major features of human existence to three cognitive interests that are held to be constitutive of knowledge:

> ... The approach of the empirical-analytic sciences incorporates a technical cognitive interest, that of the historical hermeneutic sciences incorporates a practical one; and the approach of critically oriented sciences incorporates the emancipatory cognitive interest... (p. 308).

The third of the interests identified by Habermas, the emancipatory, relates to issues that instrumental learning has failed to address. Such interest provides the means of a more analytic mode of discourse, and helps to establish a rationale for improving self-knowledge[2] and quality of communication, two concerns that are central to the educational perspective proposed here.

Further elaborating on Habermas' taxonomy of cognitive interests, Mezirow (1981) defines what he considers to be a key process for emancipatory action. That is, perspective transformation; the process, as he says, "of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psychocultural assumptions has come to contain the way we see ourselves and our relationships..." (p. 6).

Perspective transformation may give way to educational approaches other than those mechanistic ones that have been indiscriminately applied as appropriate to different domains of learning. Providing individuals with such a perspective would help them to understand the reasons embedded in the internalized cultural myths that account for their needs and feelings.

Like Mezirow, Freire (1970) underscores the importance of perspective transformation and suggests a number of ways to facilitate or reinforce it. Namely, he suggests the development of projective instructional materials posing hypothetical dilemmas in areas of crucial concern to the learner. Equally, he recommends the use of Socratic dialogue in small group settings for helping learners, who are facing common dilemmas, to elicit psychocultural assumptions beyond their ways of perceiving, thinking or behaving. Also, according to Freire, an ethos of support and non-judgmental acceptance should be created through which individuals can share different value systems and ways of seeing.

As sustained in the above literature, emancipatory cognitive interests can be of immense value to counterbalance the all too common "modern" preoccupation with technical evolution and development. Let us see next some modes of pedagogical intervention through which such interests could be addressed.

Self-Reflective Techniques

Over the last two decades or so, various self-reflective techniques have developed which support emancipatory learning and that may rightfully serve to the postmodern education enterprise. Used either in ecopolitical pedagogy or critical future studies, these techniques include, among others, generative thinking, speculative writing, and the transformative cycle of meaning.

De Bono's (1979) strategies for teaching generative thinking illustrate the first of the self-reflective techniques. Drawing on ecological theories of perception (Heider 1959, Gibson 1979),[2] de Bono contends that generative thinking about our environment and our place in it is a matter of seeing things in context rather than a matter of puzzling over abstractions in our minds. De Bono supplies learners with devices which deliberately block or hinder perceptual habits, such as taking cursory samples of sensory data, making snap judgments about these data and retreating rapidly into mental abstraction classification and generalization. De Bono's devices encourage learners to attend to their own habits of perception and help them to sustain the perceptual work by which they can gain information directly from their environments.

A second type of self-reflective technique includes Slaughter's speculative writing procedure. In his outline of critical futurism, Slaughter (1984) contends that "the most far-reaching use of speculative literature is its ability to function as an epistemological tool which questions widely held presuppositions and reveals the contingency of the present." (p. 18). Slaugther further illustrates how writing about different types of stories can perform specific functions. According to him, stories dealing with the futures of megalopolis, for instance, may prompt the reader to consider the implications of existing urban trends; seemingly, stories targeting the havoc created by computers can reflect real and well-founded fears of depersonalization and threat. By vividly imagining the future, speculative writing can usefully undermine the taken-for-grantedness of the present.

showing that the context of our experience is but one particular outcome, which could have easily been very different indeed.

A third type of heuristic device is exemplified by Slaughter's (1988) transformative cycle of meaning (T-cycle). Slaughter's cycle is divided into four broad sectors. Sector one implies a breakdown process that may be passive or active. In the passive phase, the breakdown is experienced as external and inevitable. In the active phase, it is subjected to critical analysis and some form of intervention. Sector two deals with the process of presentation and negotiation of meaning. Sectors three and four are respectively concerned with the power process, which draws on political, linguistic and epistemological sources, and the newly legitimated processes of wider macro-change.

Centrally concerned with the (re)discovery of meaning, the T-cycle supplies to the need, pointed out by future field theorists (Markley 1982, Henderson 1978, Ferguson, 1987), to identify obsolescent "industrial era" premises and to examine some of the emergent understandings that may be replacing them. According to his author, the T-cycle has proven to be useful in contexts such as teaching education, planning within specific institutions, and research and cultural criticism. While cautioning "against mistaking the tool for an account or theory of social change" (1988: 37), Slaughter wisely stresses that the tool should be taken as a measure of stability-in-change because of the important continuities of language, culture and tradition.

The self-reflective techniques summarized here may, as largely ratified, provide to emancipatory learning. While helping individuals to re(invent) desirable futures, they can also help them to (re)interpret the world as it "deeply" is: a world constructed through experiences, inherited traditions, normative views and cultural signs. In other words, self-reflective techniques can provide individuals with the language of the "hermeneutic inquirer," language which, as Habermas (1971) observes, "adapts itself in the course of interpretation to the life experience concentrated around individual meaning" (p. 163). However, because these individuals are bound to live in a world where preoccupation with

instantaneity manifests through emphasis in multi-media images and leads to the "standardization" of personal experiences, a discussion should be open about the reliability of the mass media as a source of self-reflective inquiry. This is then the task that will be taken up next.

The Media as Consciousness-Building Tools

This is not the place, nor is this the time to provide an in-depth treatment of mass media ideology. The interpretation here will rather take the form of an open discussion about the potency of the media to endorse self-reflective methodologies, and, subsequently, to generate discourses of meaning.

Dismissing voices

Pessimistic views on the mass-media issue are legion and well grounded. Many are the experts on mass communication who contend that information media instead of producing meaning wears itself out staging it. Tetzlaff (1988: 62) observes that our mediated culture "continues to be more fragmented, more seductively spectacular, and more ubiquitous all the time." In the same way, Jameson (1983) finds that there are two postmodern culture features which apply to mass media, namely: "the transformation of realities into images [`pastiche'] and the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents [`schizophrenia']" (p. 113). Elsewhere, the same writer refers to postmodern cultural reception as the experience of the "intensities" rather than the generation of meanings and specifically dismisses it as a basis for pragmatic action:

> The breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and the intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with indescribable vividness...which effectively dramatizes the power of the material...or better still, the literal signifier in isolation. (Jameson, 1984, p. 73)

Sharing Jameson's position, Baudrillard (1983) also uses the term "schizophrenia" for defining that "state of fascination and vertigo" (p. 132) linked to the delirium of communication. However, the French conservative sociologist is more "apocalyptic," particularly when he emphasizes that information production is reshaped to fit values of form rather than content, entertainment rather than information:

> A bombardment by signs, which the masses are supposed to echo back, an interrogation by converging light/sound/ultrasound waves, linguistic or light stimuli exactly like distant stars, or the nuclei that are bombarded by particles in a cyclotron: that is information. Not a mode of communication or of meaning but a state of perennial emulsion... The energy of the mass must be liberated in order to be transformed into the social. (1980: 140)

Other media experts are equally articulated in demonstrating the ever-growing power of monopoly interests. Referring to the television medium, Real (1977), for instance, observes that "...while allegedly 'giving the people what they want,' commercial television maximizes private corporate profit, restricts choices, fragments consciousness, and masks alienation." (p. xi)

The above critiques can be traced, even if without overt reference, through the mediation of major members of the Frankfurt School equally pessimistic about the manipulation of communication by the media. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer (1969), Marcuse (1964) or Habermas (1970) have denounced the power of the media to increase domination by the culture industry and the threat this poses for the individual consciousness.

Working answers

In light of the foregoing views, two questions arise. First, can our mediated culture serve the emancipatory interests of humanity? And second, have political and economic agencies

become so powerful in its manipulation of public opinion that the creation of an alternative public sphere is no longer possible?

The answer to the first of these questions would require the recognition of the shaping role of the media in a postmodern society, and the reading of mediated information with "postmodern tinted glasses." The modeling role of the media has been recognized by those theorists who, without falling into a single-minded technological determinism, have related it to the postmodern concern with surface. Harvey (1989), for example, talking of a medium like television, observes,

> It is hardly surprising that...in the era of mass television there has emerged an attachment to surfaces rather than roots, to collage rather than in-depth work, to superimposed quoted images rather than worked surfaces, to a collapsed sense of time and space rather than solidly achieved cultural artifact [sic]. And these are all vital aspects of artistic practice in the post-modern condition. (p. 61)

As far as the reading of the media is concerned, new modes of perceptual approach may be needed as a prerequisite to identify/destabilize the essential meanings of mediated information. In this way, "kaleidoscopic" reading strategies might be required to approach the "disordered order" of highly fragmented information where, as borrowing from Tetzlaff (1988), "...disconnection occurs between somewhat larger signification units. Where the component signifiers may call up reference to some external realities to some degree, although these reality-effects must necessarily remain disconnected and unrelated" (pp. 14-15).

The answer to the question about the unavoidability of mass media manipulation would be one of pragmatic action, one calling upon the development of shared awareness and the use of "interference" strategies. In effect, a solution to the systematic alienation that results from mediated information would be the stimulation of people to organize actively

around their interests, to create a collective consciousness that can counter the "established" public sphere. As underwriters of such solutions (Real 1977) put it: "Crucial to the potential of the newer media is their collective structure. As opposed to the individualism of writing and reading, the new media calls forth collective efforts of social organization." (p. 267). The development of such consciousness wouldn't be without difficulty, specially when, as Said (1983) observes, "such consumer items like "the news" --a euphemism for ideological images of the world that determine political reality for a vast majority of the world's population-- hold forth, untouched by interfering secular and critical minds." (p. 157)

Notwithstanding, collective consciousness could and should be strengthened via "interference" strategies that would help the breakdown of "official" media culture systems. And the two modes of interference suggested by Berger (1980) and Said (1983) could be of paramount importance for provoking such breakdown: First, the use of visual faculty to restore the nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity as fundamental components of meaning in representation. And second, the opening of media culture to experiences of the "other" which, as Said observes "have remained `outside'...the norms manufactured by `insiders'" (p. 158).

As speculated in the preceding pages, the media could prove to be helpful in building critical consciousness. Besides the visual pleasure they give, the pleasure of "the pure fascination, [the] aleatory, [the] psychotropic" (Baudrillard 1983: 132), the media could also give the pleasure of the sensible, reflexive discovery. The chalienge is now for scholars and practitioners to provide sound grounds and practical evidence so that the products may be taken seriously.

CONCLUSION

If learning in a postmodern world is to be equated with "commitment to meaningfulness," we need individuals able to take charge of their own inner transformation and growth. This

paper has addressed some of the ways postmodern practices may help individuals to handle that responsibility.

Building upon the transcendence of three major features of modernity (rationality, construction of metanarratives and categorizations, and social and historical determination), the paper has defined the responsibility of postmodernism as "the recovery of genuine meaning upon which a renewed culture may be found. A recovery which implies the recognition of concepts such as development of microrationalities, doubtfulness, openness, indeterminacy of being, and sensuous participation in the universe."

The paper has then considered the principles of emancipatory learning and the way they may contribute to the "postmodern" learning enterprise through a number of well-established self-reflective techniques.

The paper has finally discussed the ability of the "modern" media to generate "postmodern" emancipatory discourses of meaning, and made such ability dependent upon conditions. Firtst the recognition of the pervasive shaping role of media tools, the devising of new "kaleidoscopic" reading approaches to media, the development of a collective consciousness able to counterbalance the alienating powers of media, and the implementation of "interference" strategies through which that collective consciousness may manifest.

NOTES

[1] In this paper, the term "the media" denotes major information channels such as newspapers, journals, radio, television, and the World Wide Web.

[2] The work of Heider (1959) and Gibson (1979) challenges the long-held eighteenth century assumptions that the meaning of perceptions, such as the perception of order, can only arise from intellectual cogitation. It demonstrates the plausibility of an ecological approach to perception that holds that the environment has an informational structure at the level of objects and their causal interactions, and that human perceptual systems have evolved to detect such information.

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Figure 1. From Modernism to Postmodernism: Shifting Tenets

Modernity		*Postmodernity*
• Rationality	→	• Affective response, subjective reconstruction
• Construction of metanarratives and all categorizations	→	• Collapse of metanarratives and categorical oppositions
• Social and historical determination	→	• Activation of differences, new potentials